

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

THE NORMAN DOORWAYS AT WORDWELL AND WEST STOW CHURCHES

by Robert Halliday, M.A.

Wordwell is a parish in the Suffolk Brecklands with a small Norman church comprising a rectangular nave and chancel. These retain original features despite thorough 19th-century restoration (Munro-Cautley 1982, 370–71, 430). At the time of the Domesday survey Wordwell was a manor with a church on the estates of Bury Saint Edmunds Abbey, inhabited by fifteen families with two slaves. Population declined from the 14th century onwards, and the 1981 census recorded only twenty inhabitants, so there would have been no need to enlarge the church (Morris 1986 I, 366b; Paine 1968, *passim*). The church's Norman features include the north and south nave doorways, which possess semi-circular heads and tympana (Pls XXVIIa, XXVIIIa). On the exterior these are flanked by columns with volute capitals and surmounted by a single order of roll moulding. These doorways have previously attracted the interest of this Institute during its excursions of 1901 and 1922 (*Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XI, 64; XVIII, 72–73).

The south tympanum's exterior face (Pl. XXVIIa) is decorated with an elaborate carving of the tree of life between two animals, possibly dogs. The tree stem rises from a trefoil ornament, and its foliage spreads across the tympanum, entwining around the animals. The intertwining foliage and the style of the design, half way between formalism and naturalism, are both characteristic of English sculptural decoration during the period from 1100 and 1140 (Zarnecki 1951, *passim*).¹

The tree of life appears on thirty-nine other surviving tympana of the period in England, often flanked by animals (Keyser 1927, xxxvi–xli, 76). It can also be found on a tympanum at Llanbadarn Fawr in Dyfed and a column capital at St Peter's church, Northampton. The tree is a popular symbol in religious art, representing life, nature, sustenance and shelter, while the shedding and re-growing of leaves in autumn and spring symbolize death and re-birth. The motif of a tree with supporting figures can be traced to Iraq in the 13th century B.C. (James 1967, 42).

The north tympanum's interior face (Pl. XXVIIb) displays a crude carving of two mannikin-type figures, one holding a ring. A lattice-work pattern to the side may represent vegetation. The nature of the carving has given rise to speculation, some of it quite critical, partly due to the contrast between this and the sophisticated south tympanum. Thomas Kerrich (1748–1828), Cambridge University Librarian, described the sculpture as 'the rudest thing I ever saw', and wondered 'is it old or a barbarous thing done by some blockhead in late times?'² One survey of medieval European architecture chose it as the worst example of the difficulties that medieval masons had in reproducing the human figure, comparing it to 'the efforts of the street boy with a piece of chalk on the palings, or shall we say the masterpiece of a post-impressionist painter?' (Jackson 1913, II, 242).

Dating this tympanum could present difficulties, but a little-noticed component of the south doorway is another mannikin figure, of identical workmanship to those on the north tympanum, carved into the west side of the east door jamb. This fits so precisely into the door jamb that it can be assumed to have been intentionally carved to fit there. It may therefore be concluded that all components of both doorways are of the same date, despite differences in craftsmanship.

There is a possible explanation for the disparity between the north and south tympana.

During the Middle Ages stone and wood carvings in churches were elaborately painted. Could it be that the north tympanum's interior face was originally painted, and that the sculpture was only intended to emphasize the important details of the picture? The south tympanum would probably have been painted too, but since the paint would have been exposed to the elements, and likely to wear away, its exterior face was decorated with a boldly executed and dramatic carving, which would not be washed away by rain or snow.

Charles Keyser suggested that Wordwell's south tympanum represents an episode in the legend of Edward the Confessor, who gave a ring to a beggar (*Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XI, 64; Keyser 1927, xlviii). The beggar was St John the Baptist, who presented the ring to English pilgrims returning from Jerusalem, who in turn restored it to the King. Edward the Confessor was not formally canonised until 1161, but his cult became popular soon after his death. Although the earliest surviving written version of the ring legend was recorded in 1163 by Aelred of Rievaulx in his *Vita Sancti Edwardi*, the story probably dates from the first quarter of the 12th century (Migne 1855, cols 769–70; Barlow 1970, 273–77). Since Edward the Confessor had been a great benefactor of Bury Abbey, the Bury monks would have had good reason to commemorate the royal saint. If Keyser's thesis is accepted, the tympanum is probably the earliest surviving representation of this legend.³

The parish boundary of Wordwell fits so neatly between those of West Stow and Culford on the southern edge of the Suffolk Brecklands as to indicate that it was cut from these two adjoining parishes. Wordwell may therefore have been a daughter parish of West Stow and Culford.

The Domesday survey records West Stow as a manor with a church and a population of twenty-two families on the estates of Bury Saint Edmunds Abbey (Morris 1986, I, 364a). There has been no subsequent population decline comparable with that at Wordwell, and the 1981 census recorded 149 inhabitants there. The parish church of West Stow is mostly of 14th-century date, consisting of a west tower, nave and chancel. Like Wordwell, it received a thorough 19th-century restoration (Munro-Cautley 1982, 366), but it retains one Norman doorway on the north side of the nave. This now serves as an entrance to a vestry built in 1903. The north nave doorway at West Stow is of remarkably similar design to the nave doorways at Wordwell: it has a semi-circular head and tympanum, flanked by columns with volute capitals, and surmounted by a single order of roll moulding, although the tympanum is simply a blank stone with no ornament or decoration (Pl. XXVIIIb). The similarities between the components of this doorway and the nave doorways at Wordwell are so striking as to suggest that they are the work of the same masons, working at the same period in the opening decades of the 12th century. This is all the more probable in view of the proximity of Wordwell and West Stow, the fact that they both lay on the estates of Bury St Edmunds Abbey, and the possibility that Wordwell was partly a daughter parish of West Stow. It is therefore most probable that the Norman doorway at West Stow represents a surviving fragment of a church erected during the same building campaign as that at Wordwell.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Four column capitals and a corbel head of a design compatible with the period 1100–40 were moved from the Abbey Gardens in Bury St Edmunds and built into the interior face of the east wall of Moyses's Hall shortly before it opened as the town's museum in 1899 (*Bury and Norwich Post*, 23 May 1899, 5). It is probable that these sculptures were originally from the Abbey and produced by masons attached to that institution. On one of the capitals there is a trefoil ornament of similar appearance to that on the south tympanum at Wordwell church. Foliage springs from this in the same manner as it springs from the trefoil on the tympanum. The similarity of these motifs suggests that both sculptures are the work of the same mason.
- 2 B.L. Add. MSS 6755, f. 1815.
- 3 For other explanations of the meaning of this tympanum, see *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XI (1901), 64 and XVIII (1924), 72–73; Keyser 1927, xlviiii.

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Abbreviations for MSS

- B.L. British Library.
- S.R.O.B. Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch.